



GENDER SOCIALISATION AND GENDER NON-CONFORMITY IN MIZO SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the gender socialisation pattern in Mizo society to highlight how various agencies of socialisation imposed hegemonic gender binary practices, ensuring conformity to gendered norms. It argues that in the dominant perspective the spectrum of gender beyond male and female is not legitimised and is often flagged as immoral. This conception posed as a challenge for those who breached the binary gender demarcation. In contemporary times, however, there have been avenues to subvert the rigid lines yet there are marked with consequential attempts to curb such resistance.

Keywords: *Mizo Society, Gender Variants, Non-Conformity, Gender Socialisation.*

Introduction

All societies are known to have set of rules and regulations on what is appropriate for male and female which is accorded as gender norms. These gender norms are not homogenous entities, it varies across culture, society and with passage of time it has been known to be fluid as it is not fixed and can change over time. Different agencies such as family, religion, education, media etc. are responsible towards imparting these shared cultural conceptions of being a male or female through gender socialisation. Socialisation is an important concept in

Sociology as it is the process whereby members of society learn the values, culture, norms and way of life of their society. The concept as defined by Gillin and Gillin (1950) is, "The process by which individual develops into a functioning member of the group according to its standards, conforming to its modes, observing its traditions and adjusting himself to the social situations" (c.f. Mondal). Haralambos and Heald (2014) defined it as, "The process by which individuals learn the culture of their society". Members of society through socialisation therefore assimilate the

expectations of the society to form an identity which is unique to oneself but that is somehow in conformity to the normative pattern valued by the society where he or she belongs. Right from the birth of a child various agencies of socialisation tend to impart normative standardised behaviour to fit the child in the box of 'normality'. Agencies such as family, peer group, school, mass media, church etc. work together to ensure conformity of its members to these norms. Non conformity resulted in developing a feeling of rejection wherein individuals victimised themselves which affected the mental health of a person (Sandfort, 2007). Those who transgress gender norms are often discredited in society. Therefore, in the process of socialisation key importance is given to imparting gender conforming behaviour. A child learns his gender role and manifests his gender accordingly in social interactions. Individuals following normative expectations are considered 'normal' while the rests who deviate are considered different, abnormal, who need to be corrected. Such non-conformists who subverted the societal expectations have to endure negative sanctions such as ridicule, name callings, stigma, discrimination, punishments, etc. This gendered socialisation and the stigma associated with non-conformity is the issue that will be dealt with in this paper with reference to Mizo society.

Gender norms in traditional Mizo society

Mizo society is patriarchal. It has always been governed by strict rules with regard to the role of male and female and

their responsibilities in the family as well as community which is reflected clearly in the communal life. Mizos are a close-knit society where deviation from the norm is easily detected by the members of the community which resulted in ridicule or even punishments which can lead to defamation not only for the individual who deviate but for the close-kin too. Society is intolerant when members of society breached the natural order of behaviour and assigned roles (Menon, 2012). Therefore, gender expression beyond what is considered as normative is often unacceptable.

In Mizo literature there are ample of illustrations signifying that traditional Mizo society was clearly demarcated in terms of gender. Right from the birth of a child a new born baby boy is made to light a bamboo torch with the assistance of the elders, This, portrays the expectations laid upon a boy child to be brave and to grow as a great warrior. On the other hand, a female child is blessed to fetch a good bride price through her beauty (Lalthangliana, 2005). While Mizo ancestors were residing on the border of Myanmar, they had a way of saying the gender of a child without directly referring to its gender as male or female. For instance, when a child is born a question "*Fei nge tuthlawh?*" is asked which means 'spear orhoe?' to question the gender of the child. If it is a male, he is devoted to be a warrior and as for female it means she has to look after the cultivation/jhum (Lianthanga, 2000).

As children grow older, a young girl is engaged in household activities-fetching

water, collecting twigs from the forest and looking after her younger siblings while the young male child reared the cattle and is simultaneously obligated to fulfil his social responsibilities at the *Zawlbuk* (bachelor's dormitory) which is the centre of village life in traditional Mizo society. It is a place where young boys learn discipline and culture from the older generations of men (Lalthangliana, 2005; Lianthanga, 2000; Parry, 2009). As village settlers were often engaged in warfare, the security of the village lies in the hands of the male members of the society. Hence, the boys were trained by the adult male members of the village to be obedient to the elders, to be brave and to look after women and children. Even if they suffered severe pain, they were taught to say, "I am not in pain" which is similar to a very common phrase in English, "Boys don't cry". According to Lalengkimi (2018), the *Zawlbuk* plays an important role in social control and establishment of power structure in society.

Social responsibilities were imparted at a young age through the institution of *Zawlbuk*. At the age of ten, the boys were assigned certain services such as collecting woods to be burned in *Zawlbuk*. Except the son of the village chief, no one could escape this task. At this age they were guided by the teenage male members of the village. In the process of this guidance, unless severe blood was shed even if they were scolded by the leaders, the parents could not complain. The boys must be obedient, if not they will be punished (Lianthanga, 2000). The responsibility of harvesting in bounty so as to suffice the yearly food requirements of the family was laid upon the shoulders of the

male members. As for the girl depending on her age, she was assigned the responsibility to do the house chores. She was taught how to weave. If the family have sufficient and good quality weaved clothing it is an honour for the women so it is the main competition to provide enough clothing to wear for the family. A woman is expected to be hospitable to all. It is imperative for an unmarried woman to show hospitality towards all her suitors who courted her. If not, it can pose as a threat to her family. Male and female in traditional Mizo society know their assigned roles and stick to it without much interference in each other's tasks. According to L.B. Thanga (1978), "...[F]rom childhood there was a division of labour between a man and woman. A boy did not touch what was considered to be the job of a girl" (c.f. Lalrinawma, 2005).

As Mizo society was demarcated on the basis of gender, gender responsibilities, gender norms and behaviour it can be deducted that gender non-conformists or gender variants would not have a place in the traditional society. Therefore, one could assume that the subservient of gender norms had to endure social stigma. Even if the male members have feminine trait in them, they still have to stick to the roles assigned at birth. On this note, Mizo literature served few examples of individuals in traditional Mizo society who subverted gender norms. One example that can be sighted is that of a Mizo Chief in Saihmar village in 1780s who was known to be *tuai* (effeminate man). His name is Lalkangloa He smoked *tuibur* which is a traditional Mizo women's smoked pipe. The other neighbouring villages mocked Saihmar village for having a *tuai* Chief as

they composed a song to mock him that says, “*Kan Lal chu Lalkanglo, Saihmar kawtchhuah burtui chu luangnawi e*”, but the villagers of Saihmar defended their Chief through a song, “*Bur tui chu luangna se, Lechim, Haulul, Vanpui chu lal he hu*”, saying that even if he is tuai he is far more powerful than the Chiefs of other villages who mocked him (Hrangthiauva, 2011).

An information gathered through oral history narrated by C. Chhuanvawra (2015), depicted an existence of a Chief’s son Puallenga whose voice is feminine who smoked tuibur and used traditional *puan*, a woven cloth which is draped around to cover certain parts of the body, but the way it is draped is different in men and women. Puallenga wore it as women do. But he is known to be a brave warrior during warfare and hunting expeditions, though he never wanted the blood of the animals to stain his clothes. Through his story it can be asserted that when people exert their masculinity at a time of need, even though they may have feminine traits, it protects that person from stigmatisation from the others.

The existence of gender and sexual variants beyond the binary categorisation of male and female could also be found during the British colonisation, but it was curtailed with regulations. *Tuai khaw fang*, that is effeminate men travelling around villages was banned. “*Mawngkawluk* - which is translated as sodomy found its presence but at the time of the British colonialism, there was an order that made it compulsory to report all cases of sodomy to the Superintendent to be dealt with by him. Colonial writings also accorded that in

traditional Mizo society there were rights which legitimised the killing or harming of sodomites to the extent of causing deformation to his body. Punishment in the form of hosting a village feast the expense of which is bored by sodomites found its mention too (Parry, 2009).

While Mizoram was under the British rule in the year 1909, one of the Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, HWG Cole issued a stature (Order No. 3 of 1909. 10) criminalizing homosexuality and cross-dressing. These orders were quite in line with the age-old law prohibiting ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’ which was introduced during the British rule of India, that is Section 377 of the Indian penal code which now has been read down by the Supreme Court. From these few accounts that are highlighted it can be assumed that traditional Mizo society had witnessed gender variants who were often mocked and harassed depicting Mizo society’s insensitivity to those who do not follow gender norms.

Gender conformity/non conformity and contemporary Mizo society

With growth in technology and modernisation new job prospects have emerged thereby opening avenues beyond agricultural based economy for the Mizos. Many people are engaged in public and private sectors where gender role demarcation is minimal. This defied the age-old tradition of clear demarcation of gender roles which once existed in agricultural dependent society. Gender variants who never have spaces to subvert their traditional gender roles could now

engage in gender neutral work space. Gender variant identities and expressions beyond the binary-male and female and varied gender performances could be witnessed in multiple families, public spheres and more so in the virtual world such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, tiktok, etc. Nevertheless, these are not embraced with open arms by everyone in Mizo society as stigmatisation and resistance are reported.

Restrictive gender norms in Mizo community

Agencies of socialisation like family, schools, peer group, NGOs such as Young Mizo Association, Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP), and the church play an immense role in ensuring the conformity of gender/sexual non conformists through various means. The church deeply upholds the gender distinction. Inside the church there is segregation of the seats for males and females. Separate rows are assigned for males and females. Therefore, if a person attended a church service, he or she must pick a side to sit depending on one's gender. As a patriarchal dominated institution, the church also enforces gender conformity by indirectly advocating the dress code for male and female which is why it is normative for a woman to wear a skirt or puan in the church while males wear trousers. Male and female attires are clearly distinctive in the church. Secondly, based on Biblical teachings, churches around Mizoram acclaimed that only male and female union, the holy matrimony is permitted. So, marriage of people with the same gender is

never performed. Not only that, same sex sexuality too is out rightly rejected across different denominations in Mizoram who asserted that homosexuality is against all religious ethics and the culture of Indian society. Church sermons especially at the time when the Supreme Court of India legalised consensual same sex sexuality in 2018 dwell on the sinfulness of such acts for Christians.

Mizo Christian youths have been socialised to refrain from same sex sexuality and having romantic relationship with people of the same gender. Such teachings are cultivated through specially organised sensitization programmes in church youth fellowships where sermons enunciated on the wrongness of it often extracting verses from the Bible to support the claim. At the same time, the Mizo Christians have split opinions. In the month of February, 2019 at a gathering of thousands of Mizo youths at a religious conference, a young lady recited a poem "Thalaite hnena thurawn" (advice to the youth) composed by Lalnunpuia Hrahse. This poem comprises one line of shaming tuai, "*Siam loh dan a awm chu tuai ang a awmna*" (Acting against God's purpose of creation is relatable to tuai). This programme was posted on YouTube and this particular recitation evokes hundreds of comments and reactions on gender subversion. Some were critical of the sinfulness attributed to it while others emphasised on the wrongness of such acts. From this account it can be deduced that contemporary Mizo Christians have diverged opinions when it comes to gender and its subversion.

The position of the church is supported by important organisations in Mizo society. The Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (Mizo Women Association) issued a press release in 2015, denouncing the growth in population of tuai and *patil* (lesbian) asserting that they polluted the face of the State and it will have negative impact on the society and Christianity (Gooner, 2015). However there seems to have been no further actions taken beyond this till today.

Another remarkable agency that upholds gender conforming behaviour is the Young Mizo Association (YMA). Established in 1935 it is an association to safeguard the culture and the norms of the society to which most of the Mizos are members. This association adheres to culturally assigned gendered roles by drawing a clear demarcation on certain responsibilities bestowed upon its members. An example that can be cited is when there is an occurrence of death in a locality. On such occasions young girls from the community are given responsibility to collect rice for the bereaved family while the male members are responsible to dig the grave to bury the corpse. The objectives of the YMA are-good use of leisure, development of the society and to revere Christian ethics. YMA members of each locality in Mizoram are responsible to uphold the values of the Mizos and to protect their locality from dangers inflicting it. Non-conforming behaviour that goes against these objectives are unacceptable. An informant who is a cross dresser and a sex worker narrated how his long hair is cut short by the YMA duties while he is out on

the street. Likewise, there are other accounts lamenting the vigilant behaviour of YMA members towards sexual and gender non-conforming behaviour sanctioned through retribution and sometimes violent measures.

Most importantly family, gender socialisation starts at the family level as it is where we learn the art of living from infancy to adulthood. In my research on men who have sex with men in Mizoram (MSM) most of the MSM when asked about their childhood claim that their parents forcibly imposed upon them to follow the gendered behaviour expected of them. For instance, while they prefer to play with toys such as dolls with the other girls, the parents forced them to play with boys. Parents often beat their children and punish them thinking that it would change their orientation. One of my informant comments, “My father beats me wanting me to act like a boy but I could not, it is not something which can be changed through punishment, even if we wanted to”. Another said, “I used to snatch my mother’s puan to play with other girls, when she doesn’t allow, I secretly throw the puan out the window, exit the house and then pick it up without my mother seeing me walking out with her puan”. Parents move to the extent of punishing their children in their attempt to straighten their gender non-conforming behaviour, however for most of my informants those punishments could not change their behaviour. They acted differently while being with their parents thus deceiving them and elsewhere in a safe environment, they express their true colours. They are exasperated and so are the parents. As they grow older some of them however narrated about the support, they finally get

from their parents not because they approve their behaviour but because they get tired of trying to change them. My informants who are now in their 30s and 40s are in awe upon the slight openness towards alternative gender forms which makes the younger generations less vulnerable to stigma attached with performing alternative gender behaviour. This is largely considered by them as a change due to the impact mass media and development in technology have on Mizo society. These developments motivate gender non-conformists to fight for their rights enabling them to have courage to transcend the norm.

Conclusion

Mizo society has been governed by strict rules with regard to the role of male and female since antiquity. This has been solidified further through reverence to Christian beliefs and ethics. Various agencies of socialisation have contributed to uphold the gender norms of the society. In the midst of that, people who do not fit in the binary gender role of male and female usually hide behind the closet to evade stigma, discrimination and sanctions from the family and society at large. But, of late, the stringent gender norms practised since ages by the Mizos have been breached and defied to a certain extent in public and private sphere. Tuai parody is quite popular in entertainment, advertisements and plays broadcasted in local TV channels. It gained legitimacy in such spheres. Interestingly, those who have the power and resources to challenge gender normative patterns have emerged slowly in the society inspiring others to gain courage, to question and

subvert what is considered ‘normal’ in terms of gender and sexuality. Organisation working to assist vulnerable people who are marginalised because of their gender and sexual orientation has been established recently, thus marking a progress. However, none of these are thriving without retribution. Joseph (1996) marked that, “the visibility of gays and lesbians is a barometer of society’s openness”. Clearly, alternative forms of gender and sexuality have been more visible in Mizo society as compared to the past. But harassments, discrimination, stigma and ridicule continue to follow people who transcend normative forms of gender and sexuality. Despite the changing scenarios we see worldwide where different forms of gender find legitimacy in political, social and religious spheres, Mizo society is still highly restrictive pertaining to those who do not conform to ‘normative’ gender and sexuality.

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